

“Stepping Into the Waves . . . When Things Haven’t Turned Out Right”

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For an Advent series, Stepping Into the Waves

Luke 1:5-25

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See the Scripture by clicking [here](#).

We don't know what he had done for a living. Being a priest was rarely a full-time job. Zechariah had probably done whatever his father had done. Whatever it was, he wasn't doing it any more. He was now in the season of life when he would be teaching his sons and grandsons the family trade, and to be priests.

Instead, he sat. Elizabeth sat there too. He talked, lots. She kind-of listened. Words cannot fill emptiness.

They had no children. Year after year had birthed only monthly disappointments. They'd stopped talking about it. Then, stopped trying. He said he did not blame her. Elizabeth didn't believe him, though she treasured his kindness.

They'd stopped praying about it too. They still prayed, of course. How could they not? But no more did they pray their deepest pain.

II

Our theme for this Advent season is “Stepping Into the Waves.” We started last week with when Jesus called his disciple Peter to step out of the boat. They were in the middle of the lake! The wind was blowing and the waves churning. And there was Jesus, standing on the water. He called Peter to leave the safety of the boat, step onto the deep water, and come to where he was.

With that episode in mind, we are hearing the events leading up to Jesus' birth. We're hearing how God called people to “step into the waves.” God called them into God's Promise. Each of them went more deeply into God's Presence. But only after they'd heard God's command, and stepped.

How might God being calling each of us, and us together, to step into the waves?

III

Elizabeth and Zechariah were two people for whom things had not turned out right.

It started with such promise. Made not made in heaven, their match was nonetheless

godly. Both were from priestly families, the latest of countless generations set apart to serve the Lord and His People.¹ Now they were joined. Zechariah would be a priest. Elizabeth would bear and raise the next generation of priests. Not only them, the whole community would be blessed through their marriage.

They lived the promise. Gentle and generous. Pious, without being annoying. Faithful to God's covenant. Keepers of God's commandments. They were blameless, not just to others but before God.

But. No. Children.

People felt sad for them. And whispered about them. Things had not turned out right.

The longer we live, it seems, the more disappointments we gather. Promises that failed to conceive. Hopes that were not born. Stories that started well and are ending wearily.

Like many of us do, Zechariah and Elizabeth learned to live with it, and expected to die with it. It's like we are in our boat, in the middle of the lake. Nothing fancy about it, at all. It leaks. We fix what we can, and bail out water when we cannot. The paint is weathered, but it won't get another coat. We'll just keep it going for as long as we need it.

IV

It turns out to be the week for Zechariah to serve in the Temple. By chance (perhaps), his name comes up to offer incense to God within the Holy Place.²

He walks in alone.

He prays of behalf of God's People.

He looks up, and there, beside the Lord's altar, stands the Messenger.

You heard the Messenger's promise: *"A son for you, Zechariah! A child for your Elizabeth!"*

You heard Zechariah's objection: *"How? I am old. My wife too."*

You heard the answer. *"I am Gabriel!"* (Gabriel means "God is my Warrior." In the job-

¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kohen>

² On the incense offering, see Joel B. Green, The Gospel of Luke NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 68ff.

descriptions of angels, Gabriel's is to bring earth-shattering news.³ I don't think this Messenger is used to being second-guessed!) *"I am bringing you this royal announcement from Heaven's throne!⁴ And you ask how? To make sure you get it, you're going to stay quiet and watch this promise happen!"*

You heard Zechariah's answer. . . . Exactly.

Evidently he can still communicate well enough. Not long after, Elizabeth is buying baby clothes on Seniors' Tuesdays. Zechariah stays quite, smiling.

V

Want to imagine stepping into waves? Consider pensioners parenting for the first time!

But this isn't just a story about God finally coming through for these two.

Gabriel told Zechariah, *"Your prayers have been heard."* Which prayers? Those cried over an empty womb? Their personal prayers, Elizabeth and Zechariah's, begging for a birth?

Or, was Gabriel speaking of the prayers of all the People. Their prayers for salvation, just uttered by this priest in the empty sanctuary?

Or, was Gabriel speaking of both prayers, all prayers, held and heard by God?

For Zechariah and Elizabeth's boy will be born already equipped with a resume. John will be a new prophet Elijah. He will make the way ready for God. When the Messiah comes, the King for God's People, John will be shouting out: *"Look! Look! And get ready!"*

Zechariah and Elizabeth's boy will, of course, be a priest like his father. But his robes will be animal skin and his temple will be the wilds. Instead of blood on the altar, he will wash with river water. The Messiah Jesus will come to him, and Zechariah and Elizabeth's boy will leap with joy and baptise the Redeemer.

John will be a magnet for many, repulsive to others. He will befuddle the wise and send shivers through the powerful. And Zechariah and Elizabeth's boy, long-awaited-for, will die in a prison, beheaded by a tyrant.

³ Carol A. Newsom, "Gabriel" in David Noel Freedman (ed), The Anchor Bible Dictionary (New York: Doubleday, 1992), II:863.

⁴ The angel's message is described by Luke as an *euangelisasthai*. This word was used in Roman imperial contexts to describe an announcement regarding the emperor, such as a victory or a royal birth. From it derives our words "gospel" (via Old English) and "evangelism."

VI

His parents will never see this, any of this. They will be gone, long before John's end. Long before he even starts.

Would things unfold as they expected? They would never know.

John will be their joy and their delight. Yet neither Elizabeth nor Zechariah will live long enough to see how things turn out.

That's the thing when God calls us to step into the waves. We often don't get to see how things turn out. God gives us our part, a few pages in the script. We don't where it fits into the story. Nor do we know what twists it will take after we have done our part and left the stage.

Do we still step?

That's the challenge of faith, right. It's trusting Jesus, when we don't know how it will turn out. We might step out, and immediately sink down. We might make it to shore. Or, maybe that's not what we're doing it for.

You just don't know.

Stepping into the waves is not knowing how things will turn out. It is trusting the One who does. Jesus is why we step.

Amen.